

TRY TO BEAT THAT!: THE 1978-79 BRANDON WHEAT KINGS

# An analysis: How the west was won

BY GREGG DRINNAN

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The Brandon Wheat Kings finished the Western Hockey League season in Portland with a victory on Thursday night. That win put them into the Memorial Cup three-team round-robin championship tournament.

And, incredible as it may sound, that win lifted Wheat Kings' overall 1978-79 record — including regular season and playoff games — to 76 wins, nine losses and nine ties.

That, in itself, tells you the Wheat Kings are the best team in the WHL. But, don't kid yourself. Getting this far was not a breeze for the Brandon outfit.

Sure, Wheat Kings cruised through the regular season, all but wrapping up the Eastern Division pennant shortly after the first faceoff. Then, they zipped through that first post-season round-robin affair, before disposing of Saskatoon Blades in their first best-of-seven series.

Some people had a few doubts when Wheat Kings headed into the second round-robin series, with Lethbridge Broncos and Portland Winter Hawks. But, most of those people just wanted to be able to say 'I told you so' if the Wheat Kings were sidelined.

They weren't, of course, and the WHL's two best clubs — Brandon and Portland — lined up opposite each other for the best-of-seven final.

Everyone knows by now that Brandon's 6-3 win on Thursday night gave Wheat Kings the series, four games to two, over the Winter Hawks.

It was not, by any stretch of the imagination, an easy series win for the Wheat Kings. To a player they sang the praises of the Winter Hawks. No one tried to bury the Portland club.

The greatest margin of victory for either club was three goals. In case you've forgotten how the series went, it was like this: Portland won the opener 4-2 in Brandon; the Wheat Kings then scored 3-1 and 6-5 victories on home ice; the Winter Hawks won 5-2 in the first game in Portland; and Brandon then wrapped it up with two wins — 4-3 in overtime — and 6-3 in that Oregon city.

These were two pretty evenly matched clubs, though. And, as Brandon's Ray Allison put it, "I would not have put money on either club to win it."

What, then, what turned the Wheat Kings into champions and the Winter Hawks into bridesmaids?

The way I saw it, the major difference was in leadership — Wheat Kings had it and



Defenceman Brad McCrimmon hoists the WHL championship trophy into the air after the Brandon Wheat Kings returned to the Keystone one day after winning the title in Portland on May 3, 1979. (Brandon Sun file photo)

Winter Hawks didn't. In other words, Brandon's experienced 19-year-olds, for the most part, came through.

Brandon's Brad McCammon showed beyond a benefit of a doubt that he, and not Portland's Keith Brown, is the best defenceman in the WHL. Rightwinger Ray Allison of the Wheat Kings emerged as a strong leader, both on and off the ice. Centre Dave Stewart played likely the best hockey of

his career in the six-game affair with Portland. Defencemen Wes Coulson, before being injured, and Tim Lockridge were as solid as anyone. And, the list goes on and on.

From a Portland standpoint, the biggest disappointment of the series had to be the performance of leftwinger Perry Turnbull, who was named the WHL's most valuable player on Monday. We'll likely never know just how much an ankle injury

bothered him, but he was virtually ineffective throughout. There's little doubt but that Turnbull's lack of performance had a negative effect on the remainder of the club. All season long he was the No. 1 man, he was the guy they turned to for the big goals when they needed them. In this series, though, when the Winter Hawks turned to Turnbull, he was usually skating to the bench.

Then there was the goal-

tending, featuring Portland's 19-year-old Bart Hunter versus 18-year-old Rick Knickle of Brandon. One playing for his future, the other trying to play well enough to earn the start in the next game.

When the series started it belonged to Hunter. He simply stoned the Wheat Kings. Without Hunter, the Winter Hawks could well have been out of this affair in four or five games.

In the end, though, it was

WHL PLAYOFFS					
SCORING LEADERS					
	GP	G	A	Pt	PIM
Brian Propp	22	15	23	38	40
Ray Allison	22	18	19	37	28
Laurie Boschman	22	11	23	34	56
Brad McCrimmon	22	9	19	28	34
Dave Stewart	21	9	14	23	27
Steve Patrick	22	6	12	18	44
Brad Kempthorne	18	9	9	18	19
Tim Lockridge	22	2	7	9	31
Don Gillen	22	10	10	20	34
Wes Coulson	19	3	18	21	10
Brant Kiessig	22	15	8	23	48
Don Dietrich	21	3	2	5	10
Dave McDonald	15	3	5	8	8
Kelly McCrimmon	18	0	7	7	23
Dave Chartier	10	3	0	3	12
Darren Gusdal	20	4	6	10	4
Larry Roberts	17	2	3	5	2
Kelly Elcombe	22	1	2	3	35
Rick Knickle	16	0	1	1	6
Laverne Popple	1	0	0	0	0
Greg Mann	9	1	3	4	4
Scott Olson	9	0	0	0	0

Knickle who rose to the occasion. Granted, he got a lot of help from his defencemen, but he proved just who is the WHL's No. 1 goaltender.

And then there were the coaches, Ken Hodge of Portland and Brandon's Dunc McCallum, the WHL's coach-of-the-year.

In my mind, McCallum won this battle hands down. Wheat Kings went into the fifth game desperately needing a win. The series was deadlocked at two and Brandon was going to have to play without Coulson, Stewart and forward Kelly McCrimmon. McCallum, though, did a masterful job of coaching. His juggling act was incredible to watch as practically every possible line combination was used.

And, McCallum obviously did a much better job of motivating his players than did Hodge. It was McCallum who talked with Knickle, who had a shaky fourth game, prior to Game Five and helped the goaltender turn it around.

Hodge never did do much to shake up his club. At the end of the sixth and final game he was still using basically the same combinations that started the series.

These were all factors in deciding the outcome. But the biggest difference was the guys in the trenches. Wheat Kings got solid, consistent efforts out of guys like Don Gillen, Brant Kiessig, Steve Patrick, Dave McDonald, Brad Kempthorne, Dave Chartier and Darren Gusdal. These are the players who were doing most of the hitting, and the bodywork took its toll on the Portland club. As the series progressed, Wheat Kings seemed to be getting a bit more room to operate and that certainly didn't hurt their game of skating and moving the puck. Some players did not see all that much ice time but when they were called upon they got the job done.

## ON THE ICE

### LEAGUE FINAL

#### PORTLAND 4, BRANDON 2 Game 1, April 27, 1979

**Recap:** Brad McCrimmon gave Brandon the lead 3:41 into the game, but Portland scored twice in the second period. Brian Propp tied it 3:39 into the third period but Jim Dobson's second goal of the game 82 seconds later proved to be the winner. If Brandon wins Game 2, Game 3 will be played on April 29 in Brandon. If Portland wins Game 2, the series picks up in Oregon on April 30.  
**BWK goals:** Brad McCrimmon, Propp.  
**BWK goalie:** Knickle.  
**Shots on net:** 38-38.  
**Attendance:** 4,775, in Brandon.  
**Series:** 1-0 Port.  
**Dunc McCallum:** "They had chances and we had chances. The difference was that they scored on theirs. And, as far as we're concerned, two goals in our own building is not enough."

#### BRANDON 3, PORTLAND 1 Game 2, April 28, 1979

**Recap:** In a must-win game for the hosts, Dave Stewart scored 15 minutes into the opening frame. Referee Ian Sandercock then handed misconducts to Wheat Kings forwards Steve Patrick and Brant Kiessig for what he considered to be attempts to intimidate Portland goalie Bart Hunter as they celebrated. Ed Cooper tied the game for Portland in the middle frame, but Brian Propp and Dave Chartier replied in the third period to make Brandon winners.

There was bad news on the injury front as right winger Kelly McCrimmon cracked the same bone in his right arm that cost him 13 games mid-season.  
**BWK goals:** Stewart, Propp, Chartier.  
**BWK goalie:** Knickle.  
**Shots on net:** 42-34 Port.  
**Attendance:** 4,557, in Brandon.  
**Series:** 1-1.  
**Dunc McCallum:** "The difference was our skating ... and when we skate and move the puck. And it was nice to see my goaltender play up to his capabilities. In fact, that's also the best I've seen Hunter play."

#### BRANDON 6, PORTLAND 5 Game 3, April 29, 1979

**Recap:** Brandon defenceman Tim Lockridge scored with a second remaining in the opening frame to put the Wheat Kings up 2-0, and they held a 4-0 lead 14:10 in the second period. The Winter Hawks finally hit the scoreboard 47 seconds later and again two minutes after that, and the pressure mounted when they scored early in the third period to make it 4-3. After the teams traded goals, Dave McDonald's marker stood up as the winner, with Portland sniping again with a second remaining. Brandon would head to Portland the next morning, and was to take Brandon Travellers defenceman Greg Mann with them in case Wes Coulson's shoulder, which he injured in the second period, wouldn't allow him to play.  
**BWK goals:** Gillen, Lockridge, Propp, Allison, Kiessig, McDonald.  
**BWK goalie:** Knickle.

**Shots on net:** 42-33 BWK.  
**Attendance:** 5,191, in Brandon.  
**Series:** 2-1 BWK.  
**Dunc McCallum:** "After we got up 4-0 we quit hitting and we quit dumping the puck in. Everyone started trying to get fancy. We've done that quite often this year ... we get up on a team and the guys start thinking they'll get 10 or 15. It's a shame that that happens. You work for everything you get against that Portland club. Then, you let up for a couple of shifts and you're right back at Square 1. It's obvious that nothing in this series is going to be given to you."

#### PORTLAND 5, BRANDON 2 Game 4, May 1, 1979

**Recap:** Winter Hawks goalie Bart Hunter was simply spectacular, stopping 49 shots as Portland knotted the series 2-2. Brandon didn't score until the third period when newcomer Greg Mann, playing in place of the injured Wes Coulson, found the net 3:25 into the third period with his team trailing 3-0. Wheat Kings forward Dave Stewart — who coach Dunc McCallum said "has been my best player," suffered a charley horse and his status for Game 5 was unknown. Meanwhile, Portland forward Perry Turnbull was playing with a sore ankle and didn't take a regular shift.  
**BWK goals:** Mann, McDonald.  
**BWK goalie:** Olson.  
**Shots on net:** 51-35 BWK.  
**Attendance:** 7,818, in Portland.  
**Series:** 2-2.  
**Dunc McCallum:** "Hunter was the

difference. We outplayed them at every position but goal. We shot some pucks right at him, but he made a lot of great saves. For 10 minutes of the second period, we played likely the best hockey we've played this year ... and we didn't get a sniff. But we'll win. We'll beat those guys. My guys certainly aren't down. They're higher than kites. And, Portland has to figure they were lucky to win."

#### BRANDON 4, PORTLAND 3 (OT) Game 5, May 2, 1979

**Recap:** Rick Knickle is apparently a believer that turnabout is fair play. The Brandon goalie was sensational in stopping 52 shots, including five in overtime, and Don Gillen's second goal of the game came on a breakaway 4:28 into extra time as the Wheat Kings regained the series lead. It was almost the exact opposite of Game 4 when Portland goalie Bart Hunter stole the show. Ray Allison's goal late in the second period gave Brandon a 3-2 lead, but Florent Robidoux tied the game for Portland with less than five minutes remaining in the third period. Brandon played without Wes Coulson (shoulder), Kelly McCrimmon (broken arm, gone for season) and Dave McDonald (charley horse).  
**BWK goals:** Gillen (2), Kiessig, Allison.  
**BWK goalie:** Knickle.  
**Shots on net:** 55-37 Port.  
**Attendance:** 6,677, in Portland.  
**Series:** 3-2 BWK.  
**Don Gillen:** "I might have been off-side at centre ice if I hadn't made a bit of a cut. But once I got there,

I made sure to keep the puck with me and I skated as hard as I could. I saw (Hunter) leaning to his glove side and I shot it on the ice. I think it went through his legs. I haven't skated that fast for years. I really wanted to win this one for the fans in Brandon."

#### BRANDON 6, PORTLAND 3 Game 6, May 3, 1979

**Recap:** Portland's Dave Babych gave his team a 3-1 lead 42 seconds into the third period but the tide changed 16 seconds later when Portland defenceman Blake Wesley high-sticked Ray Allison in the face, drawing a major penalty. Allison scored 37 seconds later for Brandon, and that opened the floodgates, with Propp contributing his second goal of the game 11 seconds later and Brad McCrimmon scoring what proved to be the winning goal 3:43 into the final frame. Laurie Boschman and Brant Kiessig added insurance markers. The championship was Brandon's first in the WHL since it joined the league for the 1967-68 season. The Wheat Kings would arrive back in Brandon the next day around 5 p.m., and then catch a flight to Montreal on May 5 or 6.  
**BWK goals:** Propp (2), Allison, Brad McCrimmon, Boschman, Kiessig.  
**BWK goalie:** Knickle.  
**Shots on net:** 39-33 BWK  
**Attendance:** 7,569, in Portland.  
**Series:** 4-2 BWK.  
**Dunc McCallum:** "The guts on this team, you just wouldn't believe it. We had injuries all year, and every time someone else kept stepping in."